

Lord of the Flies: A Critique of Primitivism

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PRIMITIVISM has been defined as a 'belief in superiority of what is primitive.' As a social philosophy primitivism takes its cue from Montaigne's essay *Les Cannibales* (1580) in which Montaigne praises the blissful life of the savages and discards civilization as positively harmful. It is, as A.O. Lovejoy puts it, 'discontent of the civilized with civilization' (Quoted in *SG*, 39). In culture, the primitivist prefers the sylvan to the urban, the natural to the artificial, the instinctual to the intellectual. This is because the former, he thinks, retains the flavour of unspoilt life while the latter is the root of all corruption. The ideal of the primitivist is the Noble Savage trotting the wild woods 'ere base law of servitude began,' the type represented by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden:

Godlike erect, with native honour clad,
In naked majesty seemed, lords of all.
And worthy seemed; for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious Maker shone,
Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure.

(*Paradise Lost*, IV, 289-93)

The primitivist holds that if the trappings of civilization could be cast off, man would shine with all his pre-lapsarian glory. True progress is, therefore, moving backwards, a reversion to the pre-civilized state glamourised, by Thoreau: 'We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us' (Quoted in *PE*, 664). Admittedly, this primitivist postulate which J.A. Cuddon calls 'atavistic nostalgia' (*PDLT*, 698), is basically romantic, for it on the one hand connives at the drawbacks of early life, on the other depreciates the positive aspects of human civilization. After all, it was the crisis of existence in the form of hunger, disease and external threat that compelled our ancestors to strive for a better life guaranteed, although neither flawlessly nor universally, by modern civilization.

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is a bold cancellation of the romantic primitivist thesis that the primal is ideal. It aesthetically justifies the point that human civilization is worth retaining. Though the setting is

beyond the pales of the civilized world, the characters are British boys. Yet they represent the primitive primarily because the civilized world in the novel is represented by the grown-ups. Besides, in their as yet not being fully tutored into adult complexity, in their preference for hunting, in their abhorrence of rules, they are worthy representatives of the primitive world. It is wrong to assume that in locating evil in the boys themselves Golding has 're-energised the notion of Original Sin' (*SHEL*, 471). He rather chooses a group of British boys, not yet in their teens, to explode the Ballantynian myth about British supremacy, and, more significantly, to disprove the tenets of Chronological Primitivism. The proponents of Chronological Primitivism believe that as the past of human society is better than the present, so childhood, the 'past' of human life, is better than manhood: 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy' (*Immortality Ode*, 66). Golding rather would agree with Claude Levi-Strauss that the untutored and the sophisticated have an identical psychic pattern (*SM*, Ch V). In the ultimate analysis Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and the boys in *Lord of the Flies* are the obverse and reverse of the same coin, for both end in horror. The psychic pattern that Golding explores in *Lord of the Flies* is that man is naturally vicious, that evil lurks in every vein of man. It is opposite to the Noble Savage view of human life, which looks upon man as naturally moral and dignified. Of course, in the 'dark' world of *Lord of the Flies* there are Simon, the prophet, Piggy, the sensible intellectual, and Ralph, the custodian of virtue. Yet they too have their feet of clay. Ralph thirsts for the excitement of inflicting pain. During mock-hunting, he too fights 'to get a handful of that brown vulnerable flesh' (142). In order to exculpate himself, Piggy rationalises Simon's murder as 'an accident' (193). And Simon, whom Golding projects as a 'Christ figure,' is epileptic which symbolizes deficiency of vitality required to combat evil. He realizes the truth but becomes 'inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness':

Simon felt a perilous necessity to speak. But to speak in assembly was a terrible thing to him. (111)

In an interview with Ashoke Sen in Calcutta in 1987 Golding asserts that though he is not obsessed with evil, he highlights it in his novels because evil just cannot be 'wished away': '[...] it seems to me that you cannot write about man without including his evil and this evil is more prominent than good' (*SSM*, 1). Unlike the primitivists, he believes that wickedness is not socially derived but almost genetically transmitted. Dismissing the Freudian repression-theory Golding contends that social

regulations inhibit the paroxysm of savagery. Lift the social sanctions and 'chaos is come again.' In *Lord of the Flies* this idea has been presented through the career of the British boys who turn savages not because the environment is hostile or their survival is at stake. They degenerate because 'there aren't any grown-ups anywhere.' It is expected that in this 'purer air' away from the so-called vile war-torn world the boys would live in harmony with nature and regain a paradise where hatred and cruelty are unknown. But in reality in that 'tropical paradise' the 'innocent' boys wilfully resign to their innate predatory instinct crying for dominance. In his article on *Lord of the Flies* Prof. Jaidka argues that 'Golding's subject is not the fall of man but the fallen state of man' (*IJES*, 97). But in *Lord of the Flies* the British boys who crash-land at the island while being evacuated from a country after the atomic explosion still seem impeccable.

Out of the clutches of the adult World the boys accidentally reach a green island with a blue lagoon 'clear to the bottom and bright with the efflorescence of tropical weed and coral' (17). Apart from a hillock almost entirely covered with dense creepers and wild trees, there are an enchanting pool and a granite platform the top of which is shaded with young palm trees making a green roof over the luxuriant undergrowth. The surrounding is ideal for primitivistic indulgence. No wonder that Ralph's first feeling is one of ecstatic excitement: 'Here at last was the imagined but never fully realized place leaping into real life' (21). The urge to discard social trappings is compelling enough. Ralph, now conscious of the weight of clothes, kicks off his shoes, rips off his stockings, unties the 'snake-clasp' of his belt and stands naked. But very soon the boys come to realize that freedom minus discipline makes life insecure. So they try to build up an ordered society based on observance of rules. Thus the leader of the group is elected. Though Jack is the 'obvious leader' because of his command of the choir, they choose Ralph as their leader:

Every hand outside the choir except Piggy's was raised immediately.

Then Piggy, too, raised his hand grudgingly into the air. (30)

They use the sound of the conch to convene meetings and make it a rule that without everybody talking at once, they will have 'Hands up' like at school and only he who holds the conch will have the right to speak. They decide to list the name of the kids so that nobody gets lost in the jungle. They agree to make signal-smoke on top of the mountain and shelters

down by the beach. Thus, by choosing to be rule-bound like the civilized people they try to overcome the helpless state of the caveman.

But even when there is no tangible external threat, the ordered system falls apart too soon. The boys start flouting the rules they had agreed upon for the sake of survival. The topsy-turvy, symbolized by Ralph's standing on his head, becomes conspicuous when Jack challenges the legitimacy of the conch-rule and starts speaking without it: 'The conch doesn't count on top of the mountain' (54). When Ralph charges him with breaking the rules, he arrogantly sticks to his anarchical view: 'Who cares? [...] Bollocks to the rules!' (114). Instead of bringing water from the stream in coconut shells as previously arranged, the boys start drinking from the river. Instead of using the rock beyond the bathing pool as a lavatory, they defecate anywhere. Without making the signal-smoke, they set the whole forest on fire: 'The separate noises of the fire merged into a drum-roll that seemed to shake the mountain' (57).

In *Lord of the Flies* Golding demonstrates that 'un-accommodated man,' man bereft of the benefits of civilization, is more a cruel, ferocious, sadistic beast to be dreaded than a poor, bare, forked animal to be pitied. That even the primitive are not free from this congenital diabolism is evident from the behaviour and attitude of the children marooned on the remote island. On hearing the nickname ('Piggy') of the fat boy, Ralph shrieks with malicious laughter and slightly refers to his asthma as 'ass-mar'. Everyone, even the kids, enjoys the humiliation of Piggy when his school-name is made public: 'Oh Piggy! A storm of laughter arose and even the tiniest child joined in' (29). Jack insults Piggy as 'fatty' and derisively explains Simon's nocturnal absence from the shelter as his urge to relieve himself: 'He was taken short' (106). Out of an inexplicable destructive urge Roger and Maurice trample down the sand-castles of the three 'littluns'—Henry, Percival and Johnny. The 'biguns' like Jack derive brutish pleasure from the recollection that they have 'outwitted a living thing (pig), imposed their will upon it, and taken away its life like a long satisfying drink' (88). Even the 'littluns' like Henry exult triumphantly by 'exercising control' over little, transparent marine creatures. This mischievousness takes a sinister turn when the children playfully target Robert as pig. Very soon the mock-hunting turns out to be a real assault: 'The desire to squeeze and hurt was overmastering' (142). Though Robert is spared this time, the desire to cut, bash and kill is so compelling that in answer to Robert's proposal that they should have a real pig for hunt, Jack remarks: 'Use a littlun' (143).

It is noteworthy that notwithstanding the overriding force of evil, the process of degeneration of the boys into a bestial state is not very fast. In the early part of the novel the boys do not impress one as absolutely depraved. True, in their long tangled hair, scurfy skin, unwiped nose, unpared nails and worn-out clothes, 'put on not for decorum or comfort but out of custom' (136), they are detestable 'filthy objects' to be ashamed of. But this is somewhat external. Vestiges of acquired rules initially act as antidote to their barbaric romp. Ralph no doubt betrays Piggy's trust by leaking his embarrassing school-name to other boys, but afterwards hovering 'between the two courses of apology and further insult' he chooses the former: 'I'm sorry if you feel like that' (33). On the first occasion even an aggressive hunter like Jack hesitates to stab the piglet caught in a curtain of creepers. Though he draws his knife and raises his hand, he pauses, as Golding comments, 'because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood' (41). Even though his parents are not there to pull him up, after kicking down the sand-castle of the 'littluns,' Maurice feels the 'unease of wrong doing': 'At the back of his mind formed the uncertain outlines of an excuse' (76) for his inhumanity to the children. Even Roger whom Golding describes as an emerging Hitler figure (*SSM*, 1), throws stones at Henry but throws it only to miss:

Yet there was a space round Henry, six yards in diameter, into which he dare not throw. Here invisible yet strong was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization, that knew nothing of him and was in ruins. (78)

What Golding suggests is that not even the savages, here represented by the children, are naturally immaculate. If they prove harmless that is due to conditioning. Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor rightly observe: 'Morality is a matter of conditioning and memory, not something innate' (*WGCS*, 31).

In absence of the disciplining pressure of the civilized world in the island of *Lord of the Flies*, evil gradually eclipses human virtues and comes inevitably to preponderate. It starts with the hunters raiding the shelter at night and making good with Piggy's glasses. The shelter suddenly crumbles with 'smothering finality' (206) prognosticating the collapse of the rational order. Earlier when Jack had smacked Piggy's head, his glasses fell on the stone and one side was broken. Now that his spectacles are gone, Piggy sits 'expressionless behind the luminous wall

of his myopia' (208) which implies the failure of intellectual power to rein up brute force. Simon the visionary discovers that the dreaded beast is but the trapped body of the dead parachutist sitting up and relaxing with the blowing and subsiding of the wind. As he returns to others to tell them the truth, the savage group in their nocturnal orgy refuses to distinguish between man and the pig and brutally hacks him to death:

The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body on the hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws. (188)

Piggy who had the sanity to always rank fire and rescue over hunting and killing and who had the boldness to chastise the hunters for being a pack of painted butchers, is next to be sacrificed. Roger loosens a huge chunk of rock from the top of the castle rock, which falls thunderingly upon Piggy and smashes him. The conch, the emblem of order, at last explodes 'into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist' (222). It is note worthy that though Simon is murdered in a fit of wild frenzy, the murder of Piggy is cold-blooded. Small wonder that Roger starts sharpening 'a stick at both ends to kill Ralph, the last protector of higher values in the island. Tearing at the meat like a wild beast while Ralph burrows into a lair for survival, Jack and his party, no longer content with pig-hunting, sets the whole forest on fire. Ralph is ferreted out and they chase him as he runs for life:

They were all running, all crying out madly [...]. He forgot his wounds, his hunger, and thirst, and became fear, hopeless fear on flying feet, rushing through the forest towards the open beach. (245)

The ending of the novel shows that the worst has been averted through adult intervention. Attracted by the smoke of the bonfire, a naval officer in a trim cruiser comes to the island and saves Ralph's life. The officer is shocked at the filthiness of the appearance of the stranded boys: 'I should have thought that a pack of British boys [...] would have been able to put up a better show than that' (248). But Ralph whose experience has made him wiser knows for certain that this filth is not just external. The criminal misadventure of his fellows has taught him that,

enfranchised from civilized customs, human nature is singularly vile and debased. So he weeps for 'the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart [...]' (248). Prof. Gindin criticizes the ending and complains that the elaborate metaphorical structure built up from the beginning, at the end fizzles into a 'gimmick' (Golding's own phrase) that tends 'to simplify and palliate rather than to enrich and intensify the experience of the novel' (*PBF*, 205). The ending is likely to strike one as a 'gimmick,' a forced save-all finish through the intervention of a *deus ex machina*, if we stop at the level of the obvious that the rescue is no rescue at all, it is really an entrapment—a moving from the frying pan into the fire. There is no denying that the naval officer's trim cruiser, his white drill, epaulettes, revolver and row of guilt buttons are only, what Prof. C.B. Cox says, 'more sophisticated substitutes for the war paint and sticks of Jack and his followers' (*CQ*, 117). Indeed, the adult world whose symbol is not the cream-white conch but the sub-machine gun is equally villainous. However, a more penetrating reader is not likely to miss other suggestions evoked by the ending of the novel. It makes us feel that raw human nature is violently rapacious, as illustrated by the sadistic excitement of the boys while Ralph and Jack fight at the end:

Then they were facing each other again, panting and furious, but unnerved by each other's ferocity. They became aware of the noise that was the background to this fight, the steady shrill cheering of the tribe behind them. (221)

So it is pointless to claim that life would be safe without the bulwark offered by the civilized society in the form of law and rules. Instead of idealizing pre-historic life as pure and spotless, Golding demonstrates that the closer man moves towards the pre-civilized, the more degenerate he becomes. Absolutely helpless before unleashed barbarism, the comparatively sensible boys quite early in the novel wish to return to the adult world where some sort of security is always to be had:

We're all drifting and things are getting rotten. At home there was always a grown-up. Please, sir; please, miss; and then you got an answer. How I wish! [...]. (117)

True, the civilized world is not perfect. But nowhere Golding romanticizes the present civilization. Admittedly, a society, which, being fully conscious of its annihilating potentials, uses nuclear warhead, is not amply civilized. But to blame civilization for its many abuses is to fast oneself to death because the food could be adulterated.

In a brilliant analysis of *Lord of the Flies* Prof. Hynes observes: 'The novel tells us a good deal about evil; but about salvation it is silent' (SCBN, 180). Rephrasing this point Prof. S.M. Roy Choudhary maintains that Ralph remains caught in the dilemma of 'knowing' why things break up but 'not knowing' how to hold them together (BUJDE, 46). Not only in *Lord of the Flies*, in most of his novels Golding's abiding concern is the glaring stain of evil that marks human nature. The defeat of the Neanderthals at the hand of *Homo sapiens* in *The Inheritors* signifies the triumph of evil. Christopher Martin in *Pincher Martin* has a guilt-ridden character. In *Free Fall* Sammy Mountjoy loses his soul by seducing an innocent girl who runs mad. The ambitious spire of Jocelin in *The Spire* rises at the expense of human values. In *Darkness Visible* we are in a veritable inferno where appearance passes for reality. The essential goodness of Matty goes largely unrecognized because his skin is fire-burnt whereas Sophy, though sadistic, earns acclaim because he is pretty.

Though Prof. Peter dismisses Golding's art as that of a fabulist (FG, passim) it is not actually didactic but 'revelatory.' Therefore, an insightful reader will not fail to see that, however bleak apparently, Golding's vision, Prof. Mohit K. Ray rightly claimed in an AIR broadcast on 26th April 1984, does not 'preclude the possibility of redemption.' The compunctious recollection of their sinful career makes the suffering of Martin and Mountjoy purgatorial. Jocelin's venture to raise the spire, despite hundred setbacks, is ultimately successful. The death of Matty in his bid to rescue a child from the grip of the terrorists earns him the glory of martyrdom. *Lord of the Flies* too is not silent on the question of salvation. The novel condemns human civilization as it is but underscores civilized values as indispensable. It aesthetically reassures us that to disparage human civilization for the aberration of individuals would be as stupid as identifying the pig's head as the 'beastie.' Jack refuses to acknowledge the truth that evil inheres in human nature. But Simon who never mistakes the dim-eyed, blood-blackened, fly-haunted pig head for the beast, admits 'may be it's only us' (111): 'However Simon thought of the beast, there rose before his inward sight the picture of a human at once heroic and sick' (128). To limit the abode of the beast only to the present civilization, as wrongly done by the primitivists, is to deny that the beast is within us. Civilization, properly maintained, rather acts as a deterrent to the evil within always restless to be born. Besides, the cycle of history is irreversible—no one can be truly happy today if, divested of the amenities of the civilized, he attains a primitive state of life. The

chronic diarrhoea of the boys in the desert island signifies that 'the body of man is no longer fit for Eden.' It is, in the opinion of Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor, a 'realistic comment on the effects of eating nothing but fruit' (WGCS, 25).

'I believe that man suffers from an appalling ignorance of his own nature,' observed Golding in an interview (Quoted in SCBN). *Lord of the Flies* focuses on how horrible human nature really is, and this is a stronger justification for maintaining a well-organised rational society. Since man is basically Yahoo-natured, the primitive mode of life cannot be a worthier substitute for the civilized. Indeed resignation to the sub-rational is no solution for the damned human condition. *Lord of the Flies* convinces us that human qualities like compassion and rationality 'can flourish only in the protected condition of civilized society' (FG, 37).

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